Biblical Feminism and Church Leadership

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According to reliable sources almost 5,000 North American missionaries are women. In addition, women by increasing numbers are being ordained as ministers in mainline Protestant denominations, and Equal Rights Amendment advocates are now putting political pressure on the defeated amendment's opponents. Thus it is no wonder that a movement called "biblical feminism" has penetrated evangelicalism and stands prepared to challenge traditional views of female leadership roles. The leading proponents of this movement are Nancy Hardesty, Paul Jewett, Virginia Mollenkott, and Letha Scanzoni. Their battle cry is Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV).

What are evangelicals to do about this challenge? How does this movement relate to leadership in the church and the home? The contention of this article is that the core issue is hermeneutics, the interpretation of Scripture. But underlying the issue of interpretation is the even more basic concern of the inerrancy and authority of the Word of God.

Headship and Submission

Balance is needed between the rigid legalism that has too often characterized male leadership in fundamentalist ranks and the casual license that seeks to restructure the Scriptures in order to accommodate modern trends. The essence of the debate

is the alleged conflict between the biblical concepts of headship (κεφαλή) and submission (ὑποταγή).

The word κεφαλή appears 58 times in the New Testament, of which 45 refer to the literal/physical head and 13 are figurative. Many of the symbolic passages speak of Christ, the Head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; Col. 1:18; 2:10, 19). Two passages (Eph. 5:22-24 and 1 Cor. 11:1-16) present difficulties in interpretation. In Ephesians 5:22-24, Paul bases his call for submission on the principle of headship: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." In 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, the crux of the issue surfaces in verse 3: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

The general argument of biblical feminism in these passages is that headship (κεφαλή) refers to "source," not "authority." Williams states this view succinctly from Ephesians.

> For example, in Ephesians 5:23ff Christ is the head of the church because as its Savior he *brings it into existence.* In Ephesians 4:15-16 Christ as the head nourishes his body as it grows up into him. Since the head is the *source of life*, when Paul writes that "the head of every man is Christ," he means that man lives in dependence upon Christ strengthened and sustained by him. So Christ also lives in dependence upon God and so also the wife also lives in dependence upon her husband. Christ establishes his headship by giving himself, not by taking or possessing. He exercises his headship by saving us; this is his glory and this is the model for the headship of husbands to their wives.[1]

Toward the end of this quotation Williams accurately expresses the principle of dependence and modeling. However, his premise is wrong. Ignoring the 45 New Testament references to the physical use of κεφαλή, he assumes a certain hermeneutic regarding the symbolic passages of Christ as the Source (not the Authority) of the church and immediately applies it to husbands and wives.

But in the physical sense is it biologically correct to say that the head is the source of life? Is the head formed first and then the rest of the body? Does the nourishment of bodily function really emanate from the brain or any other portion of the skull? Obviously not. The head is the control center for the body. The brain identifies precisely what behavior should be followed by

bodily parts, so "control" or "authority" is a much better analogy from the physical realm than is the idea of "source."

Certainly spiritual application to Christ and the church follows, especially when one reads the rest of the New Testament in the light of the final command of the Lord, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20). The authority pattern of the passage is reinforced by the Greek word ἐξουσία ("authority"). Christ made plain to the Eleven that He is indeed the Head of the church; He is in control. Susan Foh considers the various options of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 and emphasizes that the focus of Paul's teaching in these difficult verses is on worshiping God in a way that is glorifying to Him. She concludes that headship must be understood within that context.

Perhaps in one sense the statement "the head of the woman is the man" (1 Cor. 11:3) could be taken literally. Perhaps man is called the head of woman (or women) because of the position to which God appointed him in marriage and in the church (potentially). In a general sense man's "headship" would be something like an honorary title, certainly not to be understood as placing every woman under the authority of any particular man, whether father, brother, or pastor. To be sure, the whole question of covering (whether cloth, hair, or attitude) is complicated, but Foh introduces an interesting possible purpose for its inclusion.

> What does the woman cover? The "head" that is to be covered undoubtedly refers to the woman's own head, but it seems likely that it also refers to her figurative head, her husband. If "head" (vv. 3, 4-5) is a double entendre (literal and figurative senses), the covering should not be dismissed as a product of Paul's time. It is significant that Paul uses the same word in both senses. The woman must cover her head to prevent her head (husband) from receiving attention through her participation in worship. What the wife does reflects on her husband. In Proverbs 31:23 the husband is respected because of the good reputation of his wife.
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> "A good wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in the bones" (Proverbs 12:4). When the woman prays and prophesies with her head uncovered, her husband (her head) comes to the fore, because the woman is his glory. It is a shame for him to receive attention in worship. The covering covers her husband so that the woman's active worship glories God.[2]

But if the problem of κεφαλή and its handling in the traditional church is disturbing to biblical feminists, the issue of submission is a battle cry. Key passages include 1 Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18; 1 Timothy 2:11; Titus 2:5; and 1 Peter 3:1-3. The word ὑποτάσσω is a logistical term referring to the arrangement of military implements on a battlefield for effective warfare. It focuses on function, not essence.

Paul wrote, "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says" (1 Cor. 14:34). This is admittedly a difficult verse. Jewett dismisses it immediately as a reflection of the Rabbinic tradition defended by Paul, a good Pharisee. Scanzoni and Hardesty argue that the word "speak" (λαλέω) refers not to a formal lecture, exhortation, or teaching but simply to general talking or idle chatter.[3] This Greek word, however, simply cannot be so narrowly restricted. One could wish their analysis of that word would hold up, for it offers a simple explanation of a difficult verse. Does "speaking" here refer to speaking in tongues, something prohibited to women at Corinth? More probably, it means open verbal dialogue in the synagogue or public place of worship (a practice which might lead to usurping a teaching role where men were involved). One thing is clear: The men are to be sufficiently knowledgeable in theology and biblical interpretation to answer any questions their wives may ask them at home.

But all this does not do away with the reality of submission. What is at stake here, as indicated earlier, is a commitment to the authority of Scripture and the inerrancy of the original text. Judged by their own writings, biblical feminists are unwilling to make such a commitment. Writing as a woman and as a credentialed theologian, Foh spells out the central problem.

> Biblical feminists do not believe that God has given us his word true and trustworthy, the unchanging standard for beliefs and practice. Instead we have a hodgepodge of information (some of it is God's pure word, and some is only man's advice, molded by his male-dominated culture), and God has left us on our own to figure out which parts to obey and believe. Human reason becomes the final authority, the judge of Scripture.[4]

Equality and Subordination

Genesis 1 and 2 give a strong biblical basis for ontological equality between man and woman. Theological presuppositions

that make man somehow superior to woman because of his chronological priority in creation are to be rejected. But the biblical evidence forces one to add to ontological equality the concept of functional subordination. But this the feminists will not tolerate. Scanzoni and Hardesty express this intolerance in strong terms.

> Today we stand at the crossroads. As Christians we can no longer dodge the "woman problem." To argue that women are equal in creation but subordinate in function is no more defensible than "separate but equal" schools for the races. The church must either be consistent with the theology it sometimes espouses and oppose all forms of women's emancipation — including education, political participation, and vocations outside the home — or it must face up to the concrete implications of a gospel which liberates women as well as men. To argue that women should have political and vocational freedom in the secular world while declaring that they should be subordinate in marriage and silent in church is to stand the gospel on its head. The church must deal with its attitudes and practices in regard to women. To fail to come to grips with this issue is to fail both God and the world we profess to serve in his name.[5]

One way to deal with this problem is to resort to the principle of "accommodation." Mollenkott, for example, says that "the Bible was not in error to record Paul's thought process," but she then explains that the reason Paul wrote what he did was to accommodate himself to Rabbinic culture.

> Many biblical feminists fear that if they admit that some of Paul's arguments undergirding female submission reflect his Rabbinical training and human limitations, the admission will undercut the authority of scriptures and the doctrine of divine inspiration. Things have come to a bad pass when we have to avoid seeing certain things in scripture (or avoid admitting that we see them) in order to preserve our preconceived notions about inspiration.[6]

But where does one draw the line on accommodation? If the Bible writers were culturally conditioned, who determines which parts of Scripture have absolute authority and which parts related only to problems in, for example, the Corinthian church? Furthermore, if accommodation were Paul's hermeneutic, the way by which he adapted his understanding of the Word of God to his contemporary cultural situation, what about the danger of interpreters' judgments today?

The theory of accommodation always undercuts the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures. At best it puts the Bible at the mercy of the modern interpreter, allowing him or her to bring biased presuppositions to the text. At worst it leads to an inci-

pient Barthianism, which, as clearly witnessed in history, ultimately ends up with the rejection of Scripture, as in the pattern of Bultmann. Knight takes Jewett and others to task in no uncertain terms.

> This position of apostolic error is maintained over against the assertion of the apostles that what they teach is God's will and is founded on God's order. Paul asserts in First Timothy 2 that the question of women in the ruling/teaching function of the church is based on the creation order and is evidenced in the fall, the two most basic factors that touch all men everywhere. Paul in First Corinthians 11 appeals to the authority relationships that God has established of God — Christ — man — woman (vs. 3); this is the most comprehensive appeal to interpersonal relationships, involving even the relationship of Christ and God. And in verse 15 of First Corinthians 11, he affirms that this is a uniform view of the churches of God. In First Corinthians 14 he emphatically says that what he teaches the Law also says (vs. 34). And finally, in reference to his teaching in First Corinthians 14, including that teaching under discussion, he says in vs. 37, "the things which I wrote to you are the Lord's commandments"! The Apostle Paul and also the Apostle Peter insist the exact opposite of Jewett, and they are saying, "Thus says the Lord."[7]

One of the feminists' arguments offered against functional subordination is that Jesus' frequent claim that He was subordinate to the Father (yet no less equal in deity) described a temporary standing, a status held only during the time of the Incarnation. But 1 Corinthians 15:27-28 demonstrates the weakness of that conclusion: "For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (NIV).

Just as Jesus is equal with yet subordinate to the Father, so a wife is equal with yet subordinate to her husband. This has absolutely nothing to do with chauvinism, superiority, or inequality. It is a matter of the way things function properly in the church and the home. One can renounce this position only by rejecting the authority of the clear teaching of Scripture. Such hermeneutical cross-purposes bring some traditional evangelicals into direct confrontation with feminism within their own ranks. Litfin describes the hesitant but necessary posture.

> Most traditionalists do not relish the prospect of a confrontation with evangelical feminists. These Christians are fellow members of Christ's body and much of what they have written is valid, even

praiseworthy. Women have often been shortchanged and every Christian needs to be made aware of it so that a proper biblical balance can be achieved. But in advocating the elimination of all gender-based roles the evangelical feminists go too far. They have embraced a profoundly unbiblical — indeed anti-biblical — ideology and are pressing it on the church. Traditionalists are convinced that they cannot stand idly by and let this happen. Thus in the tradition of Paul's encounter with Peter in Galatians 2 traditionalists feel they must confront their feminist sisters and brothers. To do any less would be, in their view, to betray the truth of God.[8]

Silence and Ministry

What about the broader question of the role of women in the church? The most obvious problem is ordination. In Romans 16:1-2 is Paul's commendation of Phoebe to be interpreted as his assigning to her the office of deacon? Foh believes that it is. However, this is an untenable view. First, an isolated case of one female deacon is hardly a strong argument for the ordination of women as elders and deacons in the church of either the first century or the present day. Second, the crucial passage that identifies the qualifications of deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13) gives no hint whatever that female deacons are to be appointed.

The word διακονία, describing "service" or "ministry" in a general way, is common in the New Testament (διακονία and its derivatives occur 34 times). It can refer to waiting on tables (Luke 10:40), offering financial support (Acts 11:29), and a host of other types of service. The form in Romans 16 (διάκονος) is found 29 times in the New Testament and is used primarily to describe one who serves at tables. This term διάκονος is applied in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 to the office of deacon; but in many other places, like its "first cousin" διακονία, it speaks of general service.

Another significant issue which often surfaces in evangelical circles is the question of whether women should teach in churches. Though several passages impinge on this issue, 1 Timothy 2:11-14 is perhaps the most difficult. "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner" (NIV).

This passage pertains not to husband-wife relationships but to the status of any woman in a public congregation. When taken with 1 Corinthians 14:34, this passage could certainly empha-

size a teaching role which is usurped or assumed and which, of necessity, places women in a subordinate rather than leadership role in the church. In context, the injunction is based on the relationship of man and woman in the original creation (Gen. 2:18; 3:6). Williams seeks to solve the problem by saying that the passage refers only to the church at Ephesus during the time of Timothy's leadership there.

> Thus in contrast to the extremists demanding full women's liberation in Ephesus, Paul prohibits the teaching of those not properly instructed. But the verb tense cannot be made necessarily into a general principle for all time. The meaning of the infinitive "to have authority" is literally "to domineer." Women are neither presently to teach [over men] nor to rule over men. They are to learn in silence.[9]

Williams may have a significant point; he does succeed in avoiding the accommodation trap. However, it may be better to understand that Paul was saying that women are not to usurp or grasp authority over men. A woman's elevation to a post of leadership (other than elder or deacon) is compatible with the Scriptures, providing it has been given to her by God (through her being selected by other church leaders) and not a result of her own successful conflict in the arena of power politics. What is at stake here is allegiance to revelation, as House delineates.

> There can be little question that the transgression of the abovementioned feminists in the matter of inspiration goes beyond acceptable limits in evangelical theology. If areas of disagreement may be eliminated merely by an appeal to socialization, then interpretation has no controls, and the idea of limited revelation or degrees of inspiration can hardly be avoided. Are Paul's arguments on the doctrine of sin coming from one man to be discounted in view of contemporary anthropological studies? Or is it to be argued that Paul merely borrowed his ideas on original sin from rabbinical theology? These obviously must be answered in the negative. But the real question is whether one will be submissive to the revealed Word of God.[10]

Galatians 3:28 ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus") emphasizes the responsibility of believers more than the rights of women. Indeed, if Christians in general placed a greater emphasis on their responsibilities rather than their rights, the church would be vastly different. Certainly the proper response is affirmation of all believers rather than the creation of a hierarchy by virtue of one's sex. Whatever the future holds for the elevation of women's roles in the evangelical community, that elevation must not be achieved by surrendering the biblical text.

Notes

1 Don Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church* (Glendale, CA Regal Books, 1977), pp 64-65 (italics added)
2 Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Nutley, NJ Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co , 1980), p 105
3 Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (Waco, TX Word Books, 1975), p 68
4 Foh, *Women and the Word of God*, p 7
5 Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, p 205
6 Virginia Mollenkott, "A Challenge to Male Interpretation Women and the Bible, *The Sojourners*, February 1976, p 22
7 George W Knight III, "Male and Female Related He Them, *Christianity Today*, April 9, 1976, pp 16-17
8 A Duane Litfin, 'Evangelical Feminism Why Traditionalists Reject It, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (July–September 1979) 270-71
9 Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church*, p 112
10 H Wayne House, "Paul, Women, and Contemporary Evangelical Feminism, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (January–March 1979) 46

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